

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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ON THE RUN

1 Samuel 21:10-15; 22:1-5

Psychiatrist Scott Peck began his book *The Road Less Traveled* with this profound sentence: "Life is difficult." Amen to that! Can I get a witness?

Sometimes life really is difficult. Even for people who love God. David discovered it to be true in his experience. Life certainly took some unexpected turns for David. I don't think his life unfolded quite the way he thought it would after his momentous defeat of Goliath, his elevation to hero status among both the people of Israel and the army of Saul, and his marriage to Michal, the king's daughter. He was on the fast track to a life of privilege and power.

But the raging jealousy and explosive anger of Saul changed all that. The king was out to get David. And David knew it. In 1 Samuel 20:3, we find David lamenting to his friend Jonathan: "There is only a step between me and death." He was *this close* to losing his life. His life was hanging by a thread. Saul hated David and wanted him dead. After Jonathan confirmed his father's intent to kill David, David ran for his life. After going to Ahimelech the priest at Nob, David fled the country and went into enemy territory. It says in 1 Samuel 21:10 that "David fled from Saul and went to Achish king of Gath." Gath was Philistine territory. Goliath was from Gath. It is hard to believe that, after defeating and killing Goliath, David would receive a warm, friendly welcome there. David had hoped he might be able to slip into Gath without being recognized. Without anyone knowing who he was. But he was recognized immediately. And Achish, I'm sure, didn't roll out the red carpet for David or hold a state dinner at the palace in his honor.

When David realized his identity had been discovered and that his Philistine hosts were suspicious of his motives and intentions, he feigned insanity. He pretended to be a madman. Because he knew it was the custom in that culture not to harm a mentally unstable person.

But David did not stay in Gath. He knew it was not safe to stay there. The Bible doesn't tell us how long he was there, but I suspect that at his first opportunity, he got out of Gath, crossed the border back into Israel, and didn't stop until he found shelter and refuge in the cave of Adullam, about 20 miles southwest of Jerusalem.

So, there he was. All alone in a dark cave. With no one to turn to, no one to talk to, except God. And I'm sure at some point David must have thought to himself: "What am I doing *here*? How in the world did *this* happen?"

Maybe you've felt like that at some point in your life. Maybe you've wondered: "How did I get *here*? How did I end up in *this* situation?"

But it did happen to David. He did end up in a cave. He did find himself a hunted man. A marked man. And the first point I want you to see today is that if this could happen to someone like David, it could happen to you and me as well.

Think about this: David was "a man after God's own heart." He had been set apart and chosen by God to be the king of Israel. He had been anointed by Samuel, the most respected, most revered, most trusted man in all Israel. David had become the toast of Israel, the people's hero, for his triumph over Goliath, the Philistine giant. His best friend was the son of King Saul. His wife was the daughter of Saul. 1 Samuel 18:5 says: "Whatever Saul sent him to do, David did it so successfully that Saul gave him a high rank in the army. This pleased all the people, and Saul's officers as well." If David, who had all these things going for him, was not immune to trouble – big trouble – in his life, you and I should not expect to go through life without our share of trials and troubles, problems and pain, setbacks and suffering.

Remember what Jesus said to His disciples in John 16:33: "In this world you will have trouble." You can count on it. Don't believe anyone who says if you just come to Jesus, or if you just have enough faith, all your problems in life will disappear. It just isn't so! Jesus said: "You *will* have trouble." That is a guarantee. It is a guarantee more certain and dependable than any promise made by any presidential candidate or any company for a product it is trying to sell. "You *will* have trouble." Just like David. So don't be surprised by it when it happens.

Fortunately, trouble is not the only thing Jesus has promised to us. While we will (and we do) have trouble in this world, Jesus says: "Take heart! I have overcome the world." You and I may experience trouble with a capital T just as David did, but our problems need not defeat us – and will not defeat us if we entrust our troubles and ourselves to the Lord and walk humbly with Him by faith.

To a group of Christians who were suffering hardships as a result of their faith in Christ, Peter wrote these words in 1 Peter 4:12-16: "Dear friends, do not be surprised at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when His glory is revealed. If you are insulted because of the name of Christ, you are blessed, for the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. If you suffer, it should not be as a murderer or thief or any other kind of criminal, or even as a meddler. However, if you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name."

I don't know if any of us here today can say that we have suffered hardships, or have been mistreated, because of our faith in Christ. Maybe in some instances you have experienced some form of discrimination or inappropriate scrutiny as a result of your commitment to the Lord Jesus. What I want you to see is that Peter's words here have a wider application. When you experience trouble of any kind in your life, don't be

surprised by it. It is just a fact of life. Troubles happen. Problems happen. Nobody, not even the man (or woman) after God's own heart, is immune. So do not let the problems or troubles, or setbacks or disappointments, or heartaches or hardships that come your way in life knock you off balance.

Remember that nothing that happens in your life is outside the scope of God's sovereign power and plan. Nothing that happens can thwart God's sovereign and gracious purposes in your life.

God allows troubles to come into our lives. God allows us to experience problems and trials. He uses them to test our faith, to deepen and strengthen our faith. He uses them to remind us of our dependence upon Him. He uses them to refine us and to make us fit for greater service in His kingdom.

Just because you and I desire to be men and women after God's own heart doesn't mean we won't experience trouble or pain or a setback of some kind. It doesn't mean we might not have to seek refuge in some kind of cave, as David did.

David's experience was by no means unique. Think of Joseph, for example. Or Elijah. Or Jeremiah. Or Paul. Were they spared from trouble because they loved God? No. Joseph was sold into slavery in Egypt by his brothers. And once in Egypt, he was falsely accused by the wife of Potiphar and thrown into jail, even though he had done nothing wrong. But God did not abandon Him. And God brought great good out of what others had meant for evil.

After Elijah had won a stunning victory over the 450 prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel and rain returned to Israel after a drought of three and a half years, the wrath of Queen Jezebel forced him to run for his life. Physically, emotionally and spiritually depleted, Elijah mistakenly thought he was the only one left who loved God and lived by His Word. He had been faithful to the Lord and served Him with unflagging zeal. But did it immunize him from trouble? No. Loving God and living by His Word was no guarantee to Elijah that he would not encounter hardships or difficulties in life. And it is no guarantee to us.

Jeremiah, reluctant prophet that he was, did what God called him to do. He repeatedly spoke God's Word to people who didn't want to hear it. And he encountered constant opposition to his ministry from those who didn't like his message.

And listen to what Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 4 about his experience as a follower and ambassador of Christ: "We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. We are hard-pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that His life may be revealed in our body" (4:7-11).

Hard-pressed, but not crushed.
 Perplexed, but not in despair.
 Persecuted, but not abandoned.
 Struck down, but not destroyed.

It doesn't sound like a very glamorous or privileged life to me. At least not in earthly terms.

Paul goes on to say more about what he has experienced as a servant of Christ in 2 Corinthians 11. Responding to critics of his ministry, he says: "I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again. Five times I received from the Jews the 40 lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else (as if all this were not enough), I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches" (11:23-28).

All of that was Paul's experience as a man who loved God and was devoted to the mission God had given him as an ambassador of Christ. Trouble, opposition and hardships seemed to follow Him just about everywhere he went.

If all these giants of faith experienced hardship and trouble in their lives, it shouldn't surprise us or knock us off-balance when trouble comes uninvited into our lives.

Jonathan Edwards, perhaps the greatest theologian America has ever produced and one of the key figures in the First Great Awakening that swept through the American colonies in the 1730s and 1740s, was eventually rejected by the church he served as pastor for more than 20 years. The church fired him. He was exiled to a mission outpost among Native Americans on the "frontier" of western Massachusetts. He was a man greatly used by God, but he was not immune to trouble in his life. Or in his church.

Charles Spurgeon, probably the most famous British pastor and preacher of the 19th century, struggled with depression for much of his life.

Troubles happen. Life is difficult. Even for people who love God and desire to do His will. So don't be surprised when trials or troubles, problems or pain, setbacks or suffering come into your life. Remember that God is still sovereign. Even if you should find yourself in some kind of cave.

The second thing I want you to see today is that even when David was running for his life, whether seeking asylum in foreign territory or hiding in a cave, even when he was all alone, he was not alone. God was with him. David found his refuge not in the cave but in the Lord.

The Book of Psalms contains two psalms written by David while he was hiding in the cave. The introduction to Psalm 57 says it was written “when (David) had fled from Saul into the cave.” Psalm 142, as well, is a prayer written by David “when he was in the cave.”

Listen to what David wrote as he gave voice to the cry of his heart:

Have mercy on me, O God, have mercy on me,
 for in you my soul takes refuge.
 I will take refuge in the shadow of your wings
 until the disaster has passed.
 I cry out to God Most High, to God,
 who fulfills His purpose for me.
 He sends from heaven and saves me,
 rebuking those who hotly pursue me.
 God sends His love and His faithfulness.
 I am in the midst of lions;
 I lie among ravenous beasts –
 men whose teeth are spears and arrows,
 whose tongues are sharp swords.
 Be exalted, O God, above the heavens;
 let your glory be over all the earth.

(Psalm 57:1-5)

David had lost everything he valued in his life. He was cut off from everything and everybody he loved. Everybody except God. But David didn't lose sight of God. He knew that the Lord was his refuge in the midst of the storms and hardships of his life. So he did not lose heart.

I don't know exactly what kind of challenge or problem some of you may be facing in your life right now. Maybe it is a newly-diagnosed illness or something you've been living with for some time. Maybe it is financial worries or uncertainty about your job security. Maybe it is the memory and pain of some kind of abuse or a family conflict that weighs heavily on your heart. Maybe it is grief over the loss of a loved one who has passed from this life into eternity. Or grief over a failed relationship. Whatever it is, you may feel like you're all alone in a cave.

What I want you to understand is that even if you feel all alone, you're not alone. The Lord is with you, just as surely as He was with David. He wants you to take refuge in Him. He wants you to see your troubles and trials, your problems and pain, your setbacks and suffering – whatever it may be in your life – as an opportunity to trust Him. An opportunity to trust God. An opportunity for Him to prove His sufficiency.

Life is difficult. Even for people who love God. Even for people who belong in faith to the Lord Jesus Christ. But God is our refuge, just as He was David's refuge when David

was running for his life. The Lord is with us, even when we feel as though we are all alone. And His grace is sufficient.

So, like David, let us praise Him among all the nations. Let us sing of Him among the peoples. For great is His love, reaching to the heavens. And His faithfulness reaches to the skies (Psalm 57:9-10).

Let it be so in our lives, to the glory of His name. Amen.